



§ *Aleph*

## THE IDEAL AND THE REAL

SERIES: PSALM 119—THE JOURNEY OF AN OLD SOUL

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Psalm 119:1-8

First Message

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Prayer is one aspect of my spiritual life I long to grow in. The apostle Paul, writing in his first epistle to Timothy, refers to the importance of encouraging men to pray: "First of all, then, I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men...Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension" (1 Tim. 2:1, 8).

So prayer is of first importance. But how can we enter into a lifestyle of prayer, especially in this fast-paced, high-tech world of Silicon Valley? I spent some time studying recently with a Romanian friend, Mihai Costeche. He told me he found it harder spiritually to live here in California than in Romania. There he had to pray about everything—even the most basic things like food, milk, aspirin and gasoline. Every day, he told me, he found that God did miraculous things to provide for him. He felt his relationship with the Lord had been damaged during his stay in the United States because everything he needed was available at his fingertips. Christians here are spiritually poorer as a result, and he felt sorry for us.

Perhaps we should begin by seeking someone who can teach us how to pray. Now I am not referring to the mechanics of prayer. Rather can we find someone older and wiser who knows God intimately and can share with us the different stages and perspectives of his spiritual journey? Last year, I discovered that just such a spiritual journey is unveiled in Psalm 119, the poetic masterpiece of prayer of the OT. This poem is structured in the form of an acrostic (eight verses for each letter of the Hebrew alphabet). While I was on vacation last summer I decided to translate one letter (eight verses) each day, and to meditate on that aspect of the psalmist's prayer. This exercise did great things for my soul, and it whet my appetite to go deeper into the text. Shortly after returning home from vacation, I met David Eckman, the Academic Dean of Western Seminary for Northern California. I was astonished to discover that David had spent seven years studying this very psalm at Oxford University in London! Since then we have become good friends, and he shared with me the fruit of all his labor on the text. Later, I taught the psalm to a men's Bible study. Each week one of the men was assigned one letter of the alphabet. He prayed that prayer every day for a week, memorizing the verses in the process, and then the following week he shared with the group the dialogue which he had had with God during that seven-day period.

I would like to share with you the results of this year-long journey. Two things about Psalm 119 were especially instructive to me during my studies of the text. First, the historical context in which the psalm is set parallels in many respects our own times; and second, I was impressed by the vulnerability of the psalmist. The writer was living in the land, after the time of the exile. Though he had righteous longings he was not sure he could live up to the Law. To compound things, his longings were not popular. The people in power

wanted little to do with righteousness, yet they seemed to be blessed with material prosperity. Paradoxically, the psalmist finds his own heart to be wayward also, and this produces great turmoil in his soul. Many of you find yourselves in similar circumstances. Your home, your job, your neighborhood, your school leave much to be desired. The circumstances in which you find yourself fall far short of the righteous longings of your heart, and this produces turmoil in your soul.

Now in the midst of his distressing times the psalmist writes with utter vulnerability. He is brutally honest about his own soul, his relationship with God, his doubts, his uneasiness about whether he can keep God's statutes, and his fears concerning the enemy. His vulnerability, however, produces in him a freedom to think of new ways to approach God and to understand eternal life. The Old Covenant formula, "*Do this, and you shall live,*" did not work for this saint. There had to be a new way, he felt. Taking the book of Deuteronomy as the starting point for his vocabulary and theology he invests with new meaning the old expressions of law and life, anticipating the New Covenant in the process. This is why I have entitled this series "*The Journey Of An Old Soul.*" This psalm is the vulnerable expression of a man whose soul has gone through a long journey to arrive at a new and exciting understanding of his relationship with the living God. I shared my studies with a Romanian friend, and here is what he said in a letter to me: "The dialogue between God and the human soul enhances new and brilliant faces [of Jesus]. And the power emanating from this source of grace is beyond imagination. I read daily 'one letter' contribution and feel deeply comforted" (Ioan Ciocmareanu). I pray that the Lord will bless us as a congregation as we make this journey together, learning what prayer is and how we should pray.

The first letter in the Hebrew alphabet is *aleph*, and each line of the eight verses which we will be looking at this morning begins with this letter. The literary structure is unique. The psalmist repeats certain words, and builds on them for his theme. For example, the last word of verse 4, *diligently*, is the same as the closing word, *utterly*, in verse 8. Similarly, the words *blessed*, *heart*, *his ways*, *my ways*, *keep*, *diligently*, and *statutes*, are repeated. The first three verses give a description of the ideal man. Then, looking to God, in verse 4 the psalmist says, "You." Verses 5, 6, 7 and 8a describe the real man; then in verse 8b the psalmist looks to God again.

Let's begin by reading the psalmist's description of the ideal man.

### I. The description of the ideal man (119:1-4)

**How blessed are those whose way is blameless,  
Who walk in the law of the LORD.  
How blessed are those who observe His testimonies,  
Who seek Him with all their heart.  
They also do no unrighteousness;  
They walk in His ways.  
You have ordained Your precepts,**

**That we should keep them diligently.** (NASB, modified)

**(a) His state: Blessed 119:1a**

The ideal man is “blessed.” This is the very first word in the Psalter:

**How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked...**

**He will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water,**

**Which yields its fruit in its season,**

**And its leaf does not wither;**

**And in whatever he does, he prospers.** (Psalm 1:1a, 3)

Bruce Waltke says that this word blessed “denotes realizing life to its fullest optimum as the Creator intended it to be experienced prior to the fall.” The psalmist sees that there is an ideal state in which man was made to walk with God in the intimacy of a garden. His life would resemble a fruitful tree whose leaf does not wither, where relationships are harmonious, where the wolf lies down with the lamb. So there is a blessed heavenly state, a higher life, and the psalmist knows about it. In the OT this state is referred to as material prosperity; in the NT it is deepened and expanded (Matt. 5:3-12) to the eternal and spiritual dimensions of life in the new heavens and new earth. Enoch had such a relationship with God. When his time on earth was over, he left the earth and walked home with God. This is the dimension that the psalmist saw.

Now what is it that makes a man or woman blessed?

**(b) His character: Righteous 119:1b-3**

His way is “*blameless*.” This does not mean that he is without sin; rather it refers to completeness. He has completed a task; the job has been done in its entirety. His life is a completed highway, a legacy for all to see with “no loose ends.” And he is humble. He does not want to live independent of God. He chooses the right teacher, and places his heart under God’s word. He ingests the word deeply and allows it to speak to him to bear its own weighty testimony about life and living. This makes him spiritually perceptive. As he studies, he refrains from legalism. He does not regard the Scriptures as merely an external code to be obeyed. Rather they are a window which enable him to gaze into heaven so that he might have a relationship with God. The God who is behind the Scriptures is the source of his deepest yearnings. And he has integrity. He seeks God with his whole heart. He is not like Solomon, who loved God but also loved himself, and left behind a divided kingdom as a result. It is this integrity which gives him uncanny wisdom. He chooses all the right ways and avoids the wrong ones. Such is the character of the blameless man.

And what was his motivation?

**(c) His motivation: The fear of God 119:4**

**You have ordained Your precepts,  
That we should keep them diligently.**

It is the fear of God that motivates the ideal man to a life of exceptional obedience. He is fearful of sinning lest he offend God. God is concerned that this man diligently complete the task he has set for him. There is a seriousness about the ideal man’s life that gives him a liberating focus. He is not distracted by all the other voices that beg for his attention. He is not like Saul, who was commanded to kill the Amalekites, lock, stock and barrel (1 Samuel 15). Saul spared the king, however, and the best of the livestock—probably because he was a donkey broker and he knew a good animal when he saw one. There was no fear of God in Saul’s heart. He did what was

right in his own eyes. But this is not how the blameless man lives.

As I thought about this blameless man, I wondered what thoughts would occupy his mind as he studied God’s commandments. When he came to the commandment “You shall have no other gods in preference to Me,” he would have been keenly aware, I feel, of the things that sought to steal his affections away from God. He would deal ruthlessly with money, possessions, television programs, whatever it was that would draw his affections away from God. When he read “You shall give honor to your parents,” he knew that this meant they should be given social weight in the community, especially by being cared for in their old age. He would take them into his home and care for them, feed them and wash them, giving them honor and dignity until the day of their death. In the commandment “You shall not murder,” he would see beyond the criminal taking of life, to things like negligent failure to take steps to protect life. For instance, he would not leave an open pit in his front yard. He would point out dangers in the work place. He would make sure that he had good brakes on his car. He would perhaps work in the local Crisis Pregnancy Center, seeking to enhance life as he had opportunity to protect the unborn. He would regard the commandment “You shall not commit adultery,” as more than a cold commandment to righteous behavior. He would discern the spirit of these words and do everything he could to cultivate his affections for his spouse. He would deal ruthlessly with lust and with romantic fantasies. He would do everything to enhance his neighbor’s home, encouraging their loyal love. The commandment “You shall not steal” would mean that he could not work the angles to become rich at the expense of the community; rather he would see this as a command to work hard in order that he might make a contribution to the community; to spread God’s love, to open his home and invite the stranger or the poor to his table because God had said this was how he should live. This is how I feel the blameless man or woman would act when he or she read the Ten Commandments.

Notice that the psalmist is a man of great moral vision who feeds his vision with revelation from the word of God. He has a keen understanding of the very essence of what man was created for, and how he enters into it through a pure relationship with God.

I like to read books that feed my own moral vision. This summer I was praying for a book that would minister to me this way during my vacation. A couple of days later a friend came to my door and gave me a copy of the biography of James Hudson Taylor, the founder of the China Inland Mission. When I read it I was transported into heavenly visions. I saw what life was like in the blessed state when someone gives his full heart to God. Here was a man who saw thousands come to Christ in a foreign land, who knew the joy of God meeting his needs through prayer alone, and who conquered devils by faith. O the depth of joy he discovered! There is a blessed state out there waiting to be revealed. Also during the summer I visited our gifted evangelist missionary in Paris, Dudley Weiner. As I walked the streets of Paris, I saw a people living in darkness, having no evangelical witness and no exposition of the Scriptures in the city. I dreamed a dream and saw a “PBC Paris,” with pastors, teachers and theologians—even a Discovery Publishing ministry in French. I dreamed that perhaps a new John Calvin would be raised up to expound the Scriptures in the French language. Let us be like the psalmist and feed our moral vision with God’s heavenly realities.

Having described the ideal man, the psalmist now goes on

to give a description of the real man.

## II. The description of the real man (119:5)

**Oh that my ways may be established  
To keep your statutes!**

### (a) His state: Inadequate! 119:5

As he contemplates the state of the blessed man he confesses that he himself feels inadequate. The opening word of verse 5, “*Oh*,” carries with it the thought, “Oh that it was so with me, but it is not.” How different is the psalmist’s response from the response of his fellow-countrymen of the past. Israel had heavenly visions of the commandments and the blessed state, but she did not respond as this man did. When Moses descended from the mountain, his face shining from his encounter with the glorious God, here is what the people said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Exod. 24:7). They were saying, in effect, “God said it. I believe it. That settles it.” Or take the incident when Joshua said to them, “Fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served...” (Josh. 24:14). They responded optimistically, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods...We also will serve the LORD, for He is our God” (Josh. 24:16, 18). Why doesn’t this man respond in like manner? Well, a thousand years have passed, and the psalmist is an excellent student of history. The people who assured Moses that they would obey the commandments all perished, unbelieving and disobedient, in the wilderness. And the generation that assured Joshua they would put away their idols instead chose incipient idolatry. The book of Joshua is followed by the book of Judges in the OT, and the appendix in Judges describes the moral climate of Israel as having descended to the level of Sodom and Gomorrah. So much for the generation that promised, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do.” The psalmist, however, has a more realistic appraisal of himself. He is humble. He is not self-righteous. He does not point his finger at his predecessors and claim to be different from them. As he studies the evil things they involved themselves in, he discerns that his own heart is no different. This is why he responds, “I wish it was so, but it is not.” He is a realist.

Alan Paton wrote the poignant classic, *Cry the Beloved Country*, describing the journey of a Zulu pastor in South Africa who must travel to Johannesburg to rescue his wayward son. It is story of a man with a broken heart. This man’s dreams are shattered as he discovers his sister has become a prostitute, his son has made a young woman pregnant, and accidentally killed a white man (who, ironically, was working for reform for blacks) during a robbery. The book traces the journey of this pastor’s broken heart and how the pain of reality gave him a transcendent humility.

We too must be idealists, but we also must be realists. This, of course, produces tension in our souls. The psalmist lives between the tension within his own soul of what is real and what ought to be. Most of us don’t like this feeling and we try to remove it by compromising the ideal or covering up the real. This is what the Pharisees did by externalizing the law and never coming to terms with the spirit of it and the depth of their own depravity. The psalmist refuses to do that. He discovers that by allowing the tension to remain, righteous longings are birthed in his soul. What follows in the text is the poetic expression of these righteous longings.

### (b) His longings for righteous character 119:6-8a

**Oh that my ways may be established  
To keep your statutes!  
Then I shall not be ashamed**

**When I look upon all Your commandments.  
(Then) I shall give thanks to You with uprightness of  
heart,  
When I learn Your righteous judgments.  
(Then) I shall keep Your statutes;**

He is longing for the time when he will be able to study and meditate on the Torah without the shame of his past failure clouding his mind. Now he feels God’s penetrating gaze probing deep into his heart, observing his lustful thoughts, his slanderous tongue, his never-ending greed and discontent, his insensitivity to the poor, his prideful independence. How he longs for the day when he will be delivered from these things; then he will be able to meditate in peace.

And he longs for the day when he will worship without feeling he is a hypocrite, when his worship of God among the congregation will be genuine expressions of thanksgiving for actual changes which God will have accomplished in his soul. Much worship today falls into the category of what I call “Sauline” worship. Saul was disobedient to God’s command and God sent a demon to harass him. Meanwhile, David was playing his harp to soothe the king’s spirit. David’s music moved Saul to tears, but his emotional response was merely sentiment, because in the next scene we find him hurling his spear at David. There was no ethical change on Saul’s part in response to the worship he entered into. Christians at times weep with emotion and appreciation during worship, but they undergo no ethical change. In private they act like Saul, hurling hard words at family members and at employees in the workplace. No ethical change has come about. Thus, like the psalmist, we long for the day when we will be able to worship without hypocrisy, but we first need to be changed by God.

Thirdly, the psalmist longs to obey without constantly drifting away. “Then I would keep Your statutes,” he says. “Statutes” here refers to that aspect of the law that speaks of the deep, eternal things that are permanent and abiding, things that should be engraved on the heart. He longs to keep the law at that level, but he finds he is forever drifting away from it; there is no consistency in his walk. Do you find that happening in your experience? You come to church and are excited and challenged about something you hear. Then, as soon as you step outside after the service, you find yourself already drifting away from what you had just resolved to do. I returned from my summer vacation having fed on Hudson Taylor’s biography, filled with dreams concerning a church in Paris, a seminary in Romania, and other things. Shortly after I stepped out of the plane, however, I came face to face with my own inadequacies. My dreams began to cloud over. For example, my three daughters have just begun the fall quarter attending three different schools, but I’m not sure I know how to lead them spiritually in those environments with all the demands and pressures they will face. Then among our own leadership at church, I have been faced with some of the chaos I have caused by my impulsiveness. So, like the psalmist, I must live with the dream of the ideal, coupled with my own depravity, resulting in the tension which I have already described.

As I pondered these things while on vacation this summer, I took a bike ride one afternoon by Lake Almanor. There is an airport by the lake, and the tree-lined runway goes straight out toward the lake. It’s a beautiful, narrow corridor, an upright, smooth highway. Beyond lay the mountains, with the white clouds drifting lazily overhead. Lord, I thought, this is how I want my life to be—to have integrity like this highway so that I can fly in your visions around the world. I got off my bike and placed six stones on the runway, one for each person

of the Trinity, and one for each member of my family. There at that altar I poured out to God all my yearnings and all my feelings of inadequacy.

This is the platform from which we come to the first petition of the psalm. The psalmist has described the ideal man, and has come to terms with the reality of his own life. (By the way, notice that he is unashamed to share his feelings about himself in worship.) Finally, we come to his first petition in the psalm.

### III. The petition of the broken man (119:8b)

**“Do not forsake me utterly” 119:8b**

Here we have the petition of a broken, humble man. The word “forsake,” used in Deuteronomy, was part of the covenant language of love between God and Israel: “Be strong and courageous...[for] the LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you” (Deut. 31:6, 8). This was God’s promise to not forsake his people. So in one sense this is not a new petition. In another sense, however, it is brand new. Deuteronomy goes on to say: “this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the land...and will forsake Me and break My covenant...then...I will forsake them and hide My face from them, and they shall be consumed” (31:16-17). “And all the nations shall say, ‘Why has the LORD done thus to this land? Why this great outburst of anger?’ Then men shall say, ‘Because they forsook the covenant of the LORD’” (29:24-25a). With that background in mind we can see how the psalmist is asking for a new level of grace. He is admitting that he is just like Israel of old who forsook the Lord and thus fell into captivity. Yet, he longs to be faithful, to have his heart sealed by grace, therefore he prays, in effect, “You ask me to keep your commandments *diligently*, then I need your *diligent* supervision.” The hymn writer put it this way,

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it,  
Prone to leave the God I love.*

The psalmist is asking God to impart to him a new level of grace that will keep him from forsaking the Lord as he is so prone to do.

### IV. Implications for our journey in prayer

#### (a) Be an idealist: Feed the heavenly vision

There is a Garden of Eden out there, a heavenly reality where men and women are blessed. Let us daily feed this heavenly vision through the Scriptures; and, I would add, supplement it with the Christian classics. Let your mind soar into these heavenly realities.

Then, when you come back down to earth,

#### (b) Be a realist: Be brutally honest about your inadequacies

We are woefully inadequate and wicked of heart. Be honest about these things. Our hearts are often cold and divided because we harbor little idols in our souls. Let us be as honest as the psalmist about our struggles.

#### (c) This tension gives birth to righteous longings

Long for heaven to come to earth in your life. “Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever!” (Deut. 5:29). Give expression in prayer to all your righteous yearnings.

Finally, having done that,

#### (d) Petition for a new level of grace

What must God do for you so that you may live righteously in your marriage, in your school, in your place of work, in your community? Have you ever asked him to do that for you? This coming week write down a petition to God asking him to do something for you which you have never asked him before. If it is God’s ideal vision for us to be righteous, then we shall be righteous indeed.

My Romanian friend Mihai Costeche shared with a group of us this summer a dream that he had ten years ago when he came to Christ. At the height of the Romanian dictator’s powers, Mihai dreamed that one day he would teach the Bible in English. When he first had the dream, he thought it would never be fulfilled, but ten years later there was a revolution. Last week he said to us, “Today my dream has been fulfilled.” I thought to myself, “God must descend to us, to do what we can’t do for ourselves.” He sent that heavenly man, Jesus Christ, who was blameless and who did keep covenant, who fulfilled the law, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. God sealed that covenant by placing you in Christ, and he has you ascend to heaven with him. This is God’s grace. Make these first eight verses of Psalm 119 your own prayer this week. Write down your dreams, your inadequacies, your internal longings, and write one petition which you have never made before; then share this with someone who is close to you.

*“For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Rom. 8:3-4).*

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